

Labour Perspectives: A Right to a Clean, Healthy and Sustainable Environment.

Any serious reflection on the environmental crisis and its political economy has to start from the broader crisis of global capitalism that forced this question again on the agenda. It also has to look into the history of the development of the environmental question and the struggle over it. This history is rich in lessons for the movement today, especially in the context where many young people radicalised by the climate crisis and entering the movement for the first time may despair on the role of the workers movement.

It is absolutely vital to locate the evolution of this question and with it the role of the workers, the shifts in the role of the workers movement from the pioneering role it played in the early struggles to the current collaboration with corporate interests in the fossil fuels, mining and other polluting corporations across the world. In this lies the perspective for orientation of the young people and many environmental justice activists towards the workers movement, which I strongly argue remains central to any possibility of building power that can force society away from the current ecocidal trajectory.

Organic crisis of global capitalism and the environment.

We are living through one of the most turbulent periods in history. Unlike in the previous periods of turbulence, today humanity is not only facing passing moments of immense suffering and acute crises like world wars in early 20th century or ongoing carnage in Gaza. We are confronting civilisational crisis, that is arguably comparable to the collapse of Pax Romana and other great civilisations of antiquity. But even here the depth and scope of the crisis were still modest by comparison. These were civilisations that covered only some parts of the world, never even a quarter of it at any given point in time.

In contrast, capitalism has created a truly world-wide civilisation for the first time in the whole history of our species. Its crisis is a truly worldwide crisis facing the whole of humanity.

Global capitalism, in deep organic crisis that manifests itself in almost every facet of life and across every region, threatens the very foundations of human civilisation and existence.

The growing threat of nuclear war and deepening crisis of climate change are just the two sharpest and acute expressions of this crisis. But this crisis is tearing the fabric of society apart and has placed the very survival of humanity in question at many levels.

Ecological crisis is a class question: the centrality of the working class to environmental justice movement.

Despite shared natural concerns about the fate of humanity and propaganda of the global elites, we have never been; we are not and we will never be in this together, under capitalism. This is true of economic, social, environmental and climate and every other crisis of capitalism including current brutal colonial wars and inter-imperialist conflicts.

The impacts of these crises are mediated by the social stratification of society into classes, and oppressive social relations based on race, and gender amongst other markers of oppressions capitalism creates and perpetuates.

As mentioned already, climate change and environmental crises in general is no exception. Despite all the declarations from the COPs, politicians and corporate spokesperson, and indeed, our collective ecological and metabolic relationship with the climate and environment, these are class questions. Class questions in the sense that the causes, responsibility and consequences vary according to class. But they are class questions also in the sense that their resolution and the terms of that resolution, will only be decided by the bitter political struggle of the living class forces.

It is the working classes and particularly, its most oppressed layers i.e. women, racial minorities, migrants, etc that bears the main brunt of the ecological crises of the capitalist system. These are people already marginalised, and degraded by crushing domination of global monopolies that benefit above all the oligarchs in the metropolitan centres of world imperialism owning them and rightfully, responsible for the environmental and other crises.

The working class, however, is not only the victim. It is actively resisting this victimisation, and brutalisation, whatever form it takes, including degradation of their environment. But this is not what makes a labour perspective on the ecological crisis significant. The subjective revulsion and resistance against violence and injustice is a natural defence mechanism of every living organism.

The significance of the working class perspective and resistance is the fact that it has the power, or to be precise, a potential power which has no equal and parallel once it is organised, and mobilised in full force.

The objective basis of the oppression of the working class also invests it with enormous power for revolutionary social change.

Unlike any other social force, the oppression of the working class flows directly from its economic exploitation as the productive class whose labour create all value in society. This places the workers on the very nerve centre of society i.e. the economy, which they paralyse partially or completely, everytime they act in collective defiance of the bosses, as an organised force, in workplace, industrial and/or general strikes.

It is also certain and the logical outcome of this exploitative relationship that the working class is forced to struggle and bring to bear this power in pushing the changes it needs to improve its condition. In actual fact, it is this permanent state of class struggle that is responsible for all the positive elements of modern civilisation, and not a natural advancement in human reason, wealth and productive power. Indeed all the rights and protections we cherish today including the universal franchise, freedom of assembly, association, healthcare, education, social security, leave days and indeed, the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment, were conquests of class struggle and the organised working class.

Not a single one of these rights was conceded without a bitter and bloody struggle. For each and every one of them, the working class paid in blood, sacrificed limbs, broken bones and countless martyrs.

This is the logic of the social relations and struggle that neither the working class nor the capitalist class can escape or wish away.

The essence of these relations-exploitation-which essentially consists in the expropriation of the unpaid surplus labour of the working class-is functional to the accumulation of capital. This pursuit for constant expansion of wealth and production for profit to accumulate even more wealth and power by a profiteering property-owning elite that monopolise the ownership of the means of production is the locomotive of the capitalist economy. To put it simply, the accumulation of capital and corporate profiteering by which it is attained, is the organising principle and motive force of the political economy of capitalism.

This has certainly brought the most phenomenal development of productive capacity of humanity and unprecedented wealth which has raised the standards of living. Today, sections of the working classes especially in the advanced capitalist countries are living the standards of life that would have been an envy of even the richest aristocracies of antiquity. But this logic is also the source of recurrent, deepening and multi-faceted crises.

It is also this logic of capital accumulation for its own sake which brings the development of the productive forces of society i.e. industry, science, technology and labour power, etc into conflict with the limits of the system. Whether these are limits placed on the economy by social relations of production, nation state or its natural environment, or any other, these contradictions explode periodically into an increasingly recurrent and extreme crises.

Overproduction and overcapacity, wars, climate and environmental crises are manifestations of this conflict. The capitalist class and its institutions can never overcome this conflict as the whole basis of their parasitic privileges rest on this system. This is true of all capitalist institutions i.e. states, political parties governing them and corporations they represents, their regional and international extensions like UN, as well as their many conventions and conferences.

If anything, the capitalists and their whole architecture of national governance and geopolitics personify the systemic logic of global capitalism i.e. constant accumulation, imperial plunder and dispossession of labour and neocolonial peoples, pollution of environment and climate, etc

The task of overturning this logic rest with the working classes. The numerical strength and centrality of the labour power of the working class to the economic functioning of society gives it enormous power than any other social force of modern society. It is the masses, and movements organising this collective power of the working class which are therefore repositories of the only real power capable of fundamental social transformation.

An Internationally renowned, British Marxist Ted Grant best sums up this power when he stated: “ Not a wheel turns, not a phone rings, not a light bulb shines without a kind permission of the working class! Once this enormous power is mobilised, no force on earth can stop it”

History of workers struggle for environmental rights and justice

The environmental crisis of capitalism is as old as the system itself. Soon after capitalism unleashed industrial revolution, pollution and degradation of the environment emerged. It

was on this basis that the pioneers of the workers movement began to take the rights to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment up. Organised labour movement began to take the question of environment up precisely because they recognised that the environmental degradation and pollution is the crisis being shouldered by the working class.

The academic studies and historians of the environmental movement have always been biased in their focus on the bourgeois legal and political reformers and their efforts for conservation of the pristine wilderness. These studies, however, failed to appreciate that the most important struggles over environmental rights as we understand them today were waged by the working class people, especially the oppressed layers of racialised and gendered labour. It was these struggles that forced the matter into public discourse and the reformist wing of the political establishment to seek accommodation and compromise.

This is evident also today where every major revival of the environmental justice movement has been linked with the explosion of the working class struggle. In the US the modern environmental justice movement traces its origins from the civil rights movement¹. It was also the black workers who waged a wild-cat strike and forced trade unions to face up the neglect of racism, and toxic chemicals that killed workers and their communities in Detroit in 1968².

In South Africa, this is also borne by the recent history of the environmental justice movement. It is the same. The current mass environmental justice movement rest primarily on the mining affected communities-which exploded into mass strike movement that took place in 2012 after the massacre of the black mineworkers protesting poverty wages failure to provide housing development and squalor in the informal settlements This is also true of the past also.

As soon as the environmental crises began to emerge in urban centres and countryside with the advent of industrial revolution, so did the struggles of the working class for environmental justice.

Mechanisation of production and horrific conditions of work and living in new factories and minefields were hazardous for workers, hence the workplace safety and health became the standard cry of the emerging trade union alongside the slave wages, long hours of work, .and child labour. But these struggles in workplaces also went parallel with struggles in working class communities against pollution of water, air and land from industrial emissions, waste and raw sewage.

Working class people organised increasingly in trade union also began taking up in their communities public health issues alongside other demands for public services. The pile up of rubbish, spillage of industrial and chemical waste and running sewage on streets. in urban centres were taken up by the activists and campaigners in the affected communities before they were taken by bourgeois liberal reformers they petitioned. Whilst the focus has been on the efforts of these reformers, many academic historians fail to recognise the protests and

¹ .Carder, E “American Environmental Justice Movement” [American Environmental Justice Movement | Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy \(utm.edu\)](#).

² . [How Detroit’s Black leaders shaped Detroit’s environmental justice, labor movements – Planet Detroit](#)

struggles of many working class and activists whose efforts forced these issues into public discourse.

Just as workers were demanding health and safety measures in the workplace they were also exerting pressure on the political establishment to institute legislative measures for health and safety standards. In communities, activists were demanding services like rubbish collection, and other sanitary measures like public toilets, sewage system, etc at the same time as they demanded regulations of industrial waste, polluting industry, air and water quality standards. They fought and struggled for creation of public infrastructure and services for protection of environment and public health i.e. public housing, healthcare, and municipal services.

These struggles linked with those of the farmers concerned about the depletion of fertility and pollution of the soil by industrial waste and pesticides linked to revolution in capitalist agriculture.

For the workers movement in this period, the linkages between all these issues were evident and it was taken for granted that they are all multiple facets of the same systemic crisis.

This view and significance of these issues to the workers movement is also evident from the fact that the earliest theoreticians of the workers movement not only extensively detailed the environmental injustices against the working class people and devastating impacts of capitalism on agriculture. They methodically studied the environmental crises of the day, and integrated the theoretical analysis of it into their programme for social transformation.

Following the ground-breaking research of the German Agroscientist Justus Von Liebig, Karl Marx argued that the capitalism has alienated humans from the natural conditions of his production and reproduction by creating a 'metabolic rift' between modern society and its natural environment. He attributed to this metabolic rift the pollution of the cities and depletion of the soil in farming areas. He further demonstrated how this rift cannot be overcome on the basis of private ownership of land and its pursuit for profit but only on the basis of collectivisation of land ownership and rational use and management for production of food and raw materials for the industry.

These processes were replicated in the colonial world in the face of onslaught on land ownership, degradation and pollution of environment by Western Imperialism and its finance monopolies that colonised vast swathe of the planet in the 18th until early 20th century. Indigenous and colonial people resisted imperialism at every stage, in every theatre. They defended their lands against colonial forces and environment from degradation by corporate monopolies plundering them.

These struggles continued almost uninterrupted until completion of the processes of proletarianisation of indigenous people. This didn't mean an end but fusion of the struggle for land and its natural resources with all other working class struggles taking shaping in accordance with the changing nature and social transformation of colonial societies.

Not only were these struggles not driven by the liberal establishment who benefited from them. As in every major question of social justice, the political establishment took the side of corporate profiteering in industry, opposed and persecuted working class activists fighting them. These only changed when the movement grew in power and strength that they could not ignore. They began to coopting it and transforming it into a blunt instrument no longer linked with the struggle for working class power and for social change.

The subversion and corruption of many environmental struggles went alongside the same processes in the labour movement. As the trade union leaders and political parties of the working class abandoned the struggle for genuine alternatives to the crises of capitalism and imperialism, they also channelled the struggles of workers into a dead-end of reformism. This meant the programme of the organised labour became narrow economism, that the the focus on collective bargaining and legislative reforms on working conditions. Other working class issues especially on the site of social reproduction including environmental and community health issues, were marginalised.

Embracing capitalism means modifying demands of the workers to accommodate profiteering of the capitalist class and pursuing the strategy incompatible with an all-rounded class struggles against all manifestations of the capitalist crises.

Lodged in the logic of this reformist economism is separation of workplace struggles from other crises of capitalism including environmental justice. Despite concerted efforts and progress registered in recent times in tying the knot of history; the workers movement is still grappling with the enduring legacy of this historic rupture. In the final analysis, the main reason for this is the persistence of the ideas and perspectives in the organised labour movement that created this rupture in the first place.

Despite the foregoing, the working class people continued to struggle including on environmental justice issues. The struggles resulted in the legal recognition of the right to a clean, health and sustainable environment in various countries. These struggles also found expression in the international law making bodies of the United Nations.

The Right to a Clean, Healthy, and Sustainable Environment in International Law.

The declaration of the UN Conference on Human Environment in Stockholm in 1972 signified the moment when the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment received the recognition in International law for the first time.

This declaration emphasized that “man has the fundamental right to freedom, equality, and adequate conditions of life, in an environment of a quality that permits a life of dignity and well-being.”

Since then, the right as outlined in the declaration underwent further development in subsequent treaties and resolutions of the UN.

On **October 8, 2021**, the **United Nations Human Rights Council** adopted a resolution recognizing the human right to “a **clean, healthy, and sustainable environment**”

Further recognition in international law.

The right was further recognised by many regional bodies.⁹

The **African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights**, the **Arab Charter of Human Rights**, and the **Escazú Agreement** are examples of regional legal instruments that affirm the right to a healthy environment. These charters and treaties underline the significance of the environment human development, health and well-being.

Since then over 155 states have domesticated and legally recognized the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment.

Everywhere, these advances were either strategic aims or by-product of the working-class and environmental justice movements and struggles.

This is not only abundantly clear from the social content of this right, but also class character of the aforementioned struggle for the legal recognition. The state to call for an international convention on environment was Sweden in the 70s when it was still a fully fledged social democratic state under a government lead by a workers party, the Social democrats. It is also not a coincidence that Portugal was the first country to recognise the right in law in 1976. The state was under revolutionary ferment that was sweeping Portuguese society, in the aftermath of the 1974 revolution.

The material consequences of the right to workers.

Enshrinement of this right in international law and domestication of these laws has had significant impact on workplace and living environment as well as their implications for health, safety, and livelihoods. Despite challenges in the neocolonial world, in many Western Countries and other advanced capitalist countries, workplaces, living quarters and other sites of social reproduction of labour are no longer a nightmare reminiscent of the horrors described in the novels of Charles Dickens and or Frederick Engels' account of "The Conditions of the Working Class in England in 1844".

Legislation of this right has given workers and communities a say in the regulation of health and safety in workplaces and determination of development in areas where they live. In many industries today across the world workers health and safety committees and reps are a common feature. Industrial developments with environmental impacts require participation of communities in environmental impact assessments and monitoring and compliances with conditions of environmental authorisations and mandatory environmental management plans. This is a tremendous step forward solely on account of the power and potential for mobilisations on questions for corporate accountability, it affords working class movements. In South Africa, this is the basis for organising on mining affected communities into an environmental justice movement that has been growing in the past two decades since the passage of the relevant legislation.

Aluta Continua: a way forward for workers and environmental justice movement.

Despite advances in regulations of workplace health and safety as well as environmental standards for human settlements. and industrial developments, compliance is everywhere being resisted by corporate interests. In many parts of the neocolonial world, the legal framework does not even exist. These areas are still treated by big multinational corporations as slave colonies for plundering of minerals and enslavement of local populations in the extractive industries responsible for most greenhouse emissions and pollution.

In the light of deepening ecological crisis of climate change, the workers movement should also step forward to lead as it has done on question workplace and community environmental crises in its early days. Climate change doesn't transcend but intensify the class struggle. As with other crises of capitalism, only the course of class struggle can settle the question of: Who pays for the cost and resolution of this crisis?

It is evident that the workers movement should lead the struggle to end climate change as the working class bears the main brunt of it. Secondly and perhaps most importantly, it should lead because the ruling class will resolve it out of benevolence and in any event, it has no solution to it. They are not going to liquidate trillions of dollars of investment simply because it is the right thing to do for the planet and humanity

This impotence is abundantly clear from the Conferences of Parties on Climate Change that have continuously failed to reach an agreement on the measures and plan for rapid transition in the face of acceleration of the climate change, increasingly extreme weather events and their devastating consequences.

Even where the corporations and governments are forced by the growing power of the climate justice movement to take an action, they exploit the transitions as opportunities for accumulation. These creates concentration of corporate wealth and power that is responsible for other ecological and social crises. They use transitions to renewable to facilitate privatisations of energy systems especially public utilities responsible for electricity and other sources of energy.

They also carry out restructurings that lead to massive job losses and savage cuts in the conditions of workers. They exploit a sense of urgency in energy crises and transitions to circumvent and rollback environmental protections and regulations won in the past.

Against this green imperialism, the working class should build a mass environmental and climate justice movement that is armed with a clear political strategy and a fighting programme. These require that the workers movement should take their rightful place in the existing climate and environmental justice movements, to repair the rift that has developed between labour and communities on issues of environment.

It means fighting and ensuring a climate and environmental justice movement agenda entails just transitions-which protect jobs, means of livelihoods and quality of life of working class and poor people.

It means educating and building a critical mass of cadre who can take up issues of transitions in workplaces and communities; a cadre who can effectively and skillfully link the ongoing

struggles of workers in the workplaces and working class people in sites of social reproduction with the struggle for a just transition to a clean renewable energy systems and sustainable post-fossil fuels based local communities and economies.

These means climate and environmental activists developing clear strategies and tactics to circumvent trade union bureaucracies that have been hopelessly compromised by the own lack of alternative perspectives to corporate profiteering or co-opted by them. One way of linking with workers for instance is supporting or even initiating workplace struggles over workers health in fossil fuel industries and using this to rekindle workers environmentalism of the early years. In South Africa, coal mining interests are the most power cabal in the mineral-energy complex at the core of the economy, as it provides over 80% of electricity and 45% of oil through coal-to oil company, SASOL, that is infamous for being the single most polluting unit of production in the whole world.

In relation to this, I have argued that instead of approaching coal miners from outside the shopfloor, the Climate Justice Coalition to which I belong, should bore and dig from within the shaftfloor and surrounding communities. I have argued that the best way to go about this is to take union resolutions on health issues in the mines and using them to link with current class cases on the toxic impacts of sulphur on the health of the coal mineworkers and communities. This has been done with silicosis, and TB in respect of which the mining industry has been made to pay billions of rands in settlement of the mineworkers.

No union bureaucrats will stop mineworkers from joining a case to get compensation for the deadly impacts of sulphur on their lungs and families. The impacts are obvious and immediate to the workers. The climate justice coalition can build a mass movement over night on the matter like this.

This is also confirmed by the history of the organised labour movement in the US as well. Oil, Chemicals and Automobile Union crafted successful alliance with the environmental justice movement based on a common programme of struggle against exploitation, health and safety at work and pollution of the local environment by the oil companies. This collaboration was also expressed in the massive strike of the workers in 1973 when environmentalists supported workers with the campaign of boycott against monopolies.

Still in the US, when the activists were faced with the treacherous and conservative union bureaucracy in Detroit, they build amongst the rank and file of the trade unions-based on the right to health and struggle against the impacts of the toxic chemicals on workers and local communities.

Above all, the workers movement need to develop a programme and cadre that can link the struggle for just transitions, climate and environmental justice with the struggle to end the system of global capitalism that has created this and many other social, economic and ecological crises facing the working class and oppressed people across the world.